Paying attention to attention

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May I have your attention?

In 2016, Andrew Sullivan, a conservative commentator and pioneer of the political blog, walked into a meditation centre and surrendered his smartphone. Explaining why he purposefully severed himself from his device, Sullivan (2016) wrote that his on-line life had begun to substitute for his real life, with virtual interaction filling the spaces where human encounters used to be, and that he had lost the attentional capacity to read books. An early adopter of living-in-the-web, Sullivan's friendships had dwindled, and his health had suffered, but the rewards of unceasing engagement with an audience of 100,000 people a day propped him up in 'a constant dopamine bath for the writerly ego'. Similar stories are circulating on this side of the Atlantic. Journalist and writer Madeleine Bunting recently downed tools and walked away from a twelve-year career and a named column at the Guardian Newspaper. The constant stimulation, task switching, and adrenaline of an all-consuming and increasingly bureaucratized profession were, she felt, corroding her ability to think in a deep or creative way. 'I can only offer a metaphor', she says. 'It felt like my imagination and use of language were vacuum packed. Like a slab of meat, coated in plastic. I had lost the versatility to turn ideas around and see them from different perspectives. I could no longer draw connections between different ideas'. Bunting (2018) observes that attention has become the preoccupation of our time, and worries there may be dire consequences if we lose our ability to pay attention: instant connectivity may come at the cost of 'the sustained concentration that leads to independence of thought and rare creativity'.

Anthropologists have attended to attention to in productive and diverse ways. For example, Lewis (1980) argued that anthropologists could productively study the question of what captures public attention in ritual. Boyer (1990) has provided an account of the cognitive salience of forms of religious representation. Stafford (2007) has argued that in 'learning religion' people's attention is often focused on the psychology of the humans around them. Contrastively, Luhrmann (2012) has argued that people's attention to their *own* minds shapes mental experience, and has described prayer amongst evangelical Christians in the US as 'paying attention to inner experience'. My own work on Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy in the UK has focused on the cultivation of attention and awareness for the prevention of depressive relapse (Cook 2017); modes of attention are also integral to Mair's work on metacognitive variety in Mongolian Buddhism (2018). In this paper, I seek to complement these works by highlighting the striking contemporary problematisation of 'attention' itself.

For many people in the UK, the country is suffering from the ubiquitous malaise of modern life generated by electronic media, professional and financial insecurity, a compulsion to consume, and the too-fast transformations of a hyperlinked society with which humans are cognitively ill-equipped to keep pace. An increasing concern with 'attention' itself is reflected in worry about the inability to pay attention, an epidemic of distraction, or increasingly fractured mental lives. For example, Tim Wu characterises modern man as 'homo distractus': 'a species of ever-shorter attention span known for compulsively checking his devices' (Wu 2017). Reduced attention has been linked to concerns about 'shallow thinking', leading to increasing mental health concerns, especially amongst young

people (Annisette & Lafreniere 2017). Limited attentional control is also explicitly linked to confirmation bias in the post-truth era. Commentators have presented the 'post-truth' age as precipitated by cognitive weaknesses exacerbated by transformations in the structure and economy of information (Mair 2017). The fear is that the ability to sustain attention has been hampered by technological developments, as people unthinkingly spend hours on social media or in rabbit warrens of click bait websites.

A crisis of attention?

Is it the case then that there really *is* an attentional crisis? After all, each modern technological advancement has been met with dystopian forecasts of the erosion of human capacity, morality or skill: the luddite destruction of the weaving looms, church rebellion against the printing presses, moral uprightness to counter the intrusion of television, all arguably share concerns about technological advancement and the dissemination of information, concerns which echo in predictions about the political consequences of rolling news in the post-truth era and the ubiquitous democratization of knowledge on the web. Perhaps fears of an attentional crisis provide the fuel for a 21st century dystopian fantasy, or possibly it is the pace of new technology that generates concern: ten years ago, there were no smartphones in the UK, today those spaces where once one was unreachable (the tube, airplanes, … Devon) are increasingly networked.

A series of high profile social media executives have recently expressed concerns about the logic of their platforms and the effects that they have on attention. Former vice-president for user growth at Facebook, Chamath Palihapitiya, recently spoke of his 'tremendous guilt' for his part in creating the 'short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops' of 'hearts, likes, [and] thumbs-up' which, in his opinion, are 'ripping apart the social fabric' (SGSB 2017). Palihapitiya's comment that he wouldn't allow his children 'to use that shit' came a day after Sean Parker, Facebook's founding president, rationalized the development of social media as a grab for attention, the logic behind which was, 'how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?' (Allen 2017). The work of keeping people 'hooked' (cf. Eyal 2014) drew on short-term social-validation feedback loops and what psychologists refer to as 'variable rewards': unscheduled messages, photos and 'likes' which arrive at random and reinforce the desire to check for them (see also Garcia-Martinez 2016). 'It's exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with', reflected Parker. 'Because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology. … The inventors … understood this consciously and we did it anyway'.

This 'crisis' is precipitated in part by corporate interest in attention: ambient advertising appropriates slivers of attention leading to distractedness and limiting the possibilities of sustained attentiveness (Wu 2017). Corporate interest in attention has led recent critics to focus on the 'attention industries' in which attention is converted to revenue (cf. Crawford 2016; Wu 2017; Jackson 2008). The value of data on the psychological responses of consumers to brands and products is reflected in increasing interest in 'neuromarketing' – market and consumer research which employs brain imaging and measurement to anticipate consumer responses to products or advertising (see Schneider & Woolgar 2012). Spaces that were previously unavailable for commercial exploitation are sought out and 'free' content is offered on media platforms in exchange for attention. Advertisements are increasingly designed to respond to and capture consumers' attention using eye tracking techniques developed originally as a psychological research method (Maughan, Gutnikov & Stevens 2007), and 'growth hacking' algorithms learn what users respond to on apps, websites and games and provide more of it, making platforms more 'sticky' (Poullain 2017).

A renaissance of attention?

This ubiquitous, stealthy grab for attention is framed as a contemporary malaise that demands redress. Wu (2017) argues that, '(w)e are at risk, without quite fully realizing it, of living lives that are

less our own than we imagine'. Similarly, Palihapitiya called on his audience to question their own relationship with social media. 'You don't realise it, but you are being programmed', he said. 'It was unintentional, but now you gotta decide how much you're going to give up, how much of your intellectual independence'. It is felt that without practices that encourage deep sustained attention, humans may become less intelligent and less creative. For example, Guy Claxton (1998) has argued that the small 'c' creativity of everyday 'eureka moments' (the brainwave in the bath, for example) is lost if people become locked into rapid modes of thought.[1 (#paying-attention-attention-n-1) (http://aotcpress.com/articles/paying-attention-attention/#paying-attention-attention-n-1)] For Claxton, other modes of thinking are crucial to mental development and just require more time.

On this basis, Maggie Jackson (2008) has argued that the erosion of attention as a result of contemporary engagement with tech is hastening a 'coming dark age': 'As we cultivate lives of distraction, we are losing our capacity to create and preserve wisdom and slipping toward a time of ignorance that is paradoxically born amid an abundance of information and connectivity' (2008: 16). For Jackson, attention is both the problem and the solution. If distraction is the malaise of post-modern life, improved attention offers the possibility of cultural renewal and progress. Learning forms of sustained attention might save us from a coming 'dark age'; as she puts it, we could 'ignite a renaissance of attention by strengthening skills of focus and perception' which are 'key to intimacy, wisdom and cultural progress' (2008: 13). In other quarters, Tristan Harris has founded Time Well Spent, a non-profit which seeks to address what he refers to as the 'digital attention crisis' (Bosker 2016). And Matthew Crawford has called for an 'attentional commons' (Crawford 2016): the possibility that noise and distraction in public spaces be regulated and that the government intervene in contexts where people are being excessively manipulated. Crawford advocates for skill-based activities that engage with the material world, as opposed to a mediated experience of the world through technology.

Thus, human capacity for deep, sustained attention has become a cultural concern. In each of these examples, we see calls for a skilful response to ambient advertising, smartphone addiction and rabid consumerism. Developing sustained attentional control is called for as a redress to attentional 'hijacking', enabling people to *choose* when and to what they pay attention. People might learn to take control of their attention rather than 'sleepwalking' into unwitting biases and automatic cognitive patterns (see also Cacioppo & Patrick 2008; McGilchrist 2012; McPherson et al 2001). But if the 'crisis of attention' is to be tackled through an invigorated focus on attention, it is unlikely that this will come from industry regulation or governmental policy. Jackson's 'renaissance of attention', if it comes from anywhere, is more likely to begin with practices of self-regulation. For example, one of the most popular smartphone apps currently on the market is 'Moment', which helps users spend less time on their phones by tracking their screen time and logging the number of times they check their devices. Alternatively, the app 'Freedom' actively blocks content in apps, websites and email for periods of time so that users can be 'free of distractions'; it also offers a Locked Mode to 'prevent cheating'.

'Paying attention in a particular way'

Perhaps these concerns about attention and calls for attentional regulation go some way to explaining the contemporary popularity of mindfulness in the UK. During a conference on Mindfulness in Schools held in London in 2016, 1000 educators sit facing a large stage in a packed room of soft-tiered seating. At the end of a long day of workshops, presentations and mindfulness practices, the director of the Mindfulness Initiative, Jamie Bristow, addresses a wilting but rapt audience. Dressed in a good suit and clearly comfortable on the stage, he tells us that one of the greatest threats faced by young people in the UK today is corporate competition for their attention. Mindfulness, for Bristow and the conference delegates, offers a possible method to counter the effects of this rapacious economy. Earlier in the day, a headmaster from a secondary comprehensive told me that loss of

attention is more than a problem for academic attainment: "We're encouraged to be consumers and part of that is not really thinking about the impulses to buy or shop, and there's nothing in our society that encourages us to stop. There's a political economic investment in us not having independence. So, what would give us cause to develop it?' From the stage, Bristow addresses the room: "In this context, to develop mindfulness is nothing less than to take back autonomy, reasserting the right to *decide* what is deserving of your attention, and that is powerful'.

The most common definition of mindfulness is 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn 1994: 4). In the past five years mindfulness has regularly been in the press. The Huffington Post labelled 2014 'the year of mindfulness' in a feature length editorial (Gregoire 2014) and The New York Times branded 2015 the year of 'the mindfulness backlash', equally loudly (North 2014). Not only did mindfulness suddenly have media cachet, it had earned its own backlash. Even if people did not practise it, or know completely what it was, by the end of 2015 large numbers of people had heard of it, and many of them had developed quite strong opinions about it. In the UK, mindfulness has been introduced into schools, universities, prisons, the probation service, the police force, the workplace – public, private, and third sector – and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy has been mandated on the National Health Service for certain patient populations. Mindfulness is believed to help those who practice it cope with life (from stress, anxiety, and depression to impulse control, emotional regulation and intellectual flexibility) and it is being interpreted as a positive intervention for societal problems as wide ranging as depressive relapse, criminal recidivism, children's academic performance and worker burn out. It is now so normal for people to practise mindfulness (or think that they ought to) that if you have an iPhone, you have an inbuilt mindfulness section in your health data app which tells you that 'taking some time to quiet your mind, be in the moment, can make you less stressed and improve your health overall'. In short, the present moment is having its moment.

The interpretation of meditation as a proto-scientific technique for the amelioration of suffering in non-religious contexts may be traced back to modernist Buddhist trends of the 19th century. Meditation increasingly came to be framed as a method for psychological development, in ways that accorded with enlightenment ideas of the perfectibility of man through moral reflection, self-observation and control of the passions (cf. McMahan 2008: 203). But mindfulness has also been heavily informed by another significant intellectual and cultural strand in modernist thinking: romanticism. Budding in the long 19th century, and in full bloom today, interpretations of meditation appealed to two constituents of romantic thought: a deep concern that modernity is leading to isolation, atomisation and ill health; and an emphasis on a quality of engagement with 'ordinary' experience to transcend the ills of modernity. The injunction in mindfulness to 'pay attention in a particular way: on purpose', finds a comfortable synergy with concerns about atrophying attentional capacity, offering the romantic possibility of a newly invigorated engagement with life and a healthy relationship with herself on the part of the practitioner. Learning techniques that support this is associated with 'waking up': it is an attentional clarion call to live fully in life rather than move through it as a passive sleepwalker, anaesthetised by the short-term gains of immediate attentional gratification.

In an impassioned and personal cry for the value of silence, web-obsessed, compulsive blogger, Andrew Sullivan described immersion in his meditation retreat: 'My breathing slowed. My brain settled. My body became much more available to me. I could feel it digesting and sniffing, itching and pulsating. It was if my brain were moving from the abstract and the distant toward the tangible and the near' (Sullivan 2016). Similarly, Madeleine Bunting told her BBC Radio Three audience that she found a path back to creativity through her mindfulness practice: 'You learn to place attention in the moment, no longer running away into the past or the future', she said. 'Noticing small details such as the sunlight or the taste of the coffee. That dwelling in the moment is both the result of and the trigger for greater acceptance of self and of others' (Bunting 2018). Practising meditation comes to be

explicitly associated with an aspiration towards living a life in which one is fully 'present'. Bringing awareness to the 'present moment', learning to 'be' with what is rather than trying to fix or change anything, is described as bringing a 'freshness' to lived experience, a direct perception of the world (cf. Cook 2015; McMahan 2008). The world comes alive in all of its extraordinary ordinariness, not as a result of any external changes in the world itself, but as a result of the quality of awareness that is brought to perceiving it. This echoes what Charles Taylor has referred to as the 'affirmation of ordinary life' in his work on modern subjectivity – a development of the idea that the good life is to be found within quotidian experience by engaging with it in a particular way (Taylor 1989: 211-304) and the possibility of standing back from experience through a kind of 'radical reflexivity' (Taylor 1989: 163) in order to remake oneself through disciplined work. Contemporary engagements with mindfulness practices are informed by the modern valorisation of ordinary life as the 'location of sacrality' (McMahan 2008: 221): the merging of the ordinary and the extraordinary in what Virginia Woolf called 'the cotton wool of everyday life' and 'moments of being' (Woolf 1985: 65-70; in, McMahan 2008: 225) and what the historian of religion David McMahan nicely refers to as the 'interweaving of the prosaic and profound' (McMahan 2008: 233). Meditation becomes a therapeutic practice, a means for self-work through a sense of oneness or wonder in daily life by appealing to the human capacity for reflection and attention.

Conclusion: attending to attention

How did we come to treat attention as an object of concern? Beginning relatively recently and informed by the popular uptake of scientific theories of epigenetics and neuroplasticity, many people in the UK have come to think of the mind as a site for work in a new way (cf. Rose & Abi-Rached 2013).[2 (#paying-attention-attention-n-2) (http://aotcpress.com/articles/paying-attention-attention/#paying-attention-attention-n-2)] It is a new cultural phenomenon to think of the cultivation of attention and awareness, learning to develop a metacognitive relationship with one's own mind, as a central constituent of the good life. As McMahan argues, 'The idea that all reality is mediated, ordered, and reflected by the mind – in the mind – … [has given] unprecedented power *to* the mind' (2008: 201-2; emphasis added). The capacity to relate to one's own mind is understood to be a human universal which can be cultivated to support health and well-being. Having the reflective capacity to choose when and to what one pays attention is presented as a practice of freedom because the curated choices of consumption are no longer slavishly observed.

The emphasis in this paper has been on the importance not only of contextualising attention as an analytic object – of reminding ourselves that we are not the proverbial brain in a vat – but also of contextualising our interest in it. Our inquiry into attention can be enriched by the work of philosophers, psychologists and scientists. But it is worth remembering that though the nature of attention and its relationship to human experience is in many ways an age-old analytic and scientific question, the ways in which we approach it and of course the solutions we arrive at have their own histories, cultures, and sociologies. They do not arise in a vacuum. The genealogy of mindfulness I have described here, for example, has highlighted its distinctively modern roots in rationalism and romanticism, despite its appeal to older traditions, as well as the recent and remarkable upswing in public and political interest in attention as an object of governance, by both the self and by others. In 1890 William James wrote '*My experience is what I agree to attend to*. Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind — without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos' (James 1890 [2016]: 402, emphasis in original). A century and a half later, attention is being problematized as a commodity, as a symptom and as a cure. Given this chorus of social concern, it is perhaps worth asking now more than ever, 'are you paying attention?'

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[1]For Claxton, creativity may be stimulated by encouraging the ‘hazy poetic uncontrolled margins of thinking’, what he refers to as ‘the tortoise mind’ (Claxton 1998). (#to-paying-attention-attention-n-1)

[2]This of course has a long and particularly British history. See Thomson 2006 on British fantasies of mind development since the end of the nineteenth century. (#to-paying-attention-attention-n-2)